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HIGH-TECH

Carroll Calms the Technophobic

There is only one thing that longtime computer people really respect in their own kind: You might think it's innate brilliance, an elegant solution delivered by a quick mind, a useful insight into a problem delivered from a different perspective, or



some pure accomplishment reserved for noble scientists. Nope. That's what you're supposed to be doing anyway. Making a good cup of coffee is a better résumé credit.

What really counts is your computer birthday—when you joined the club. That indicates the level of technology available when you started, which becomes a shorthand indicator of how much sweat, struggle, trouble, and strife you shared with the other old-timers before things developed to the sophisticated level of whatever day it is when you end up having an auctioneerlike conversation such as the following. "Remember when you had to type `http://` into Web browsers? What about the Web before browsers, just text and Lynx? The time before .com domains existed? Commercial BBSs? DOS 3.0? Intel 286? Motorola 68000 and 68020? Amiga? Atari? Free single-line basement BBSs? Commodore 64? Vic-20? Radio Shack 'Trash-80'? The 8086 chip? Apple II? The Byte 8 kit? Teletypes? Time-sharing? Cobol? Fortran IV with WatFor and WatFiv? PDP-11? Card readers and paper tape?"

Of course, every one of those things is now obsolete. It is perverse to celebrate all the things you've learned that now mean nothing. Or do they mean

nothing? The further back you can go, the more it means you've been able to adapt. Plus, you know where all the modern stuff came from and how it got to be the way it is. Above all, you've likely developed some kind of perspective about things, a sense of inner calm that grows over time and just becomes reinforced every time a computer crashes. I myself have achieved a state of bemused detachment toward technology and hope someday to progress into casual disdain.

But there are still a lot of people who haven't adapted to technology so well, especially to computers. They treat them delicately, with some kind of fear, awe, or a misguided respect. (The more I know about computers, the more I respect my bread machine.) One of the dividing lines between the fearful and the contemptuous is a generational one: Most pre-remote control people simply haven't had opportunities for developmental experiences with technology.

But one member of the baby-boom generation who learned how to make peace with technology is Canadian author Jim Carroll, who is probably best-known as cowriter of *The Canadian Internet Handbook*. In particular, Carroll is known for his ability to communicate the value of technology and networks to businesspeople. However, his latest work is aimed beyond the business and Internet crowds. Titled *Surviving the Information Age* (Prentice Hall Canada, \$14.95), it is aimed squarely at dispelling technofear among the computer-unskilled or semiskilled. It's much less about technology than about shedding old attitudes regarding it, and learning how to kick a little computer butt.

Carroll's perspective is refreshingly nontechnical, because this book isn't

really intended to train you in a specific series of tasks. It contains a good deal of Carroll's own point of view, punctuated with lots of anecdotes and examples taken from real situations. In particular, he reflects on his own initiation into using computers in the early 1980s, when he was an accountant dealing with the financial records of various businesses, many of which were in some phase of computerization.

It was at that point that he recognized the power of technology and computer networks, while observing the behaviours of people who were encountering new technologies for the first time. He saw bright, capable people freeze up—unable to translate the processes of their jobs into computer routines. Carroll makes it clear that he is no natural computer whiz. He writes of painfully learning software from incomprehensible manuals, then watching it all become obsolete within a year or two. But, from the experience, he learned how to keep learning and also to expect change as a constant in matters of technology.

The book is written from the viewpoint of a boomer speaking to his own generation—not that members of other demographic groups wouldn't also find it interesting and useful. Still, that perspective helps deliver what Carroll considers an urgent message for people in their 40s and 50s—that computers and rapid change are here to stay, but they aren't that scary if you approach them with the right attitude, the attitude that younger people grew up with. The book itself is an easy read, thanks to its personal, friendly tone, aided by dozens of quotes from sources as diverse as William Shakespeare, P. J. O'Rourke, and Andy Warhol, who posthumously contributes, "They say that time changes things, but actually you have to change them yourself." ■